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Canaries in the Coal Mine: On the Political Representation and Participation of Social Groups

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Canaries used to be taken into the coal mines to warn miners for danger to come. Nowadays, the phrase is still used as an idiom describing a warning sign. Diversity and gender studies scholars resemble these canaries in some respects. They are occasionally put in cages, where they may even die, but where they can also sing. Contrary to those of the canaries, their songs are in themselves warning signs, underlining political and societal problems, and often danger to come. Many diversity and gender studies scholars are driven by a concern about structural inequalities, marginalization, and exclusion which certain social groups face in politics and society. The more they sing, the more danger there seems to be, whereas – for what I know – the silence of the canaries represents the danger. Note that a sudden silence of diversity and gender studies scholars represents a similar imminent danger, as we have unfortunately witnessed over the last couple of years. But the question here is what diversity and gender studies scholars are concerned about and warning for nowadays, more particularly when it comes to the political representation and participation of social groups.

Diversity and gender studies scholars have tremendously contributed to research on political representation and participation. They started from the fact that all around the globe women and other marginalized and excluded social groups had acquired political rights but were nonetheless highly under-represented, sometimes not represented at all, in political decision-making, and their participation quasi non-existing. Based on that fact, diversity and gender studies scholars in politics started to investigate the causes of this issue, question its consequences, and to reflect upon interventions meant to remedy for it. This research, which to a large extent emanated in the 1990s, boosted in an up to then unknown way the intellectual development of theoretical knowledge and empirical research on representation and participation.

At the outset, much of that work built on the dimensions of the concept of political representation as defined by Pitkin (1967), namely formal, descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. Initially, this work mainly relied on the dimension of descriptive representation, starting from the premise that democratic representation and participation goes hand in hand with an adequate representation and participation of all social groups. To that end, the focus was both on the construction of theoretical arguments, such as the *politics of presence* or *parity democracy* in order to strengthen the political call for women and other social groups in politics, and on the unpacking of thresholds in electoral systems, parties, and broader society preventing them to fully participate. A lot of research also investigated gender and other quotas, reserved seats, or similar mechanisms to remediate for the strong under-representation of women, people of color, and citizens with a foreign – and religiously distinct – background. In sum, research reflected upon why diversity in political representation and participation matters, where and how existing systems and institutions - be they formal or informal - are biased, and what mechanisms could compensate for such biases.

Then, research quickly shifted to the substantive dimension of representation, trying to capture the link between representatives with specific socio-demographic and/or ideological features and their political work. The underlying question was who is inclined to represent who in politics. That question was a logical follow-up on the research on descriptive representation. Indeed, the latter was not so much seen as an end in itself than as a way to improve substantive representation. In the end, what matters, is an adequate representation of the needs and interests of the people in all their diversity.

The last decade, the research agenda evolved in a number of interesting ways. First, in the slipstream of the study of substantive representation developed research on – especially – the parliamentary setting and the thresholds it contains for people of color, women, and other social groups traditionally not present among politicians. A lot of that literature looks at what is happening within the arenas of political representation, decoding formal and informal institutions on their discriminatory nature. It unpacks their gendered, classed, racialized, sexualized and otherwise biased nature, thereby bringing the subtle working of power cues into the picture. Similarly, scholars look into an actor of crucial importance in

many systems of political participation and representation, political parties, and where and how they are selective gate-keepers. This literature nicely reveals that it is not sufficient to spread out power by broadening the range of actors participating in political deliberation and decision-making, as the institutions in themselves, their rules and practices, underlying norms and values, facilitate and justify the power of some over others. This also includes parliaments and parties as working spaces, the position and working conditions of parliamentary staff and that at the party central office. Much of that work translates into recommendations meant to make the political arena more inclusive for individuals of a broad range of social groups. Lately it puts on an intersectional lens to move from gender-sensitive to intersectionality-sensitive political arenas and to democratize parties.

Two recent foci in this context are the level and variety of violence characterizing politics and the increasing presence of anti-gender actors within electoral and institutional politics. Diversity and gender studies scholars pay increasing attention to the range of (verbal, psychological, physical, sexual, and other) forms of violence present in politics and the extent to which they are gendered, racialized, sexualized, and touch particular social groups more than others. Much of that literature focuses on women, illustrated by the frequent use of the acronym VAWIP (violence against women in politics), with some intersectional touches (women of color or foreign descent, Muslim women, eventually candidates and politicians from the LGBTQI+ community). It documents the prominent level of different forms of violence faced by these candidates and politicians, from other candidates and politicians, media and especially social media, as well as public opinion and society at large. The literature shows how this violence targets specific social groups more than others, impacts their work, physical and mental health, sometimes even engagement, and undermines the working of politics, let alone democracy.

Also related to violence, though not exclusively, is the recent and rapidly growing concern of diversity and gender studies scholars about anti-gender actors and their mobilization. While much of the by now abundant work initially studied mainly the phenomenon itself such as its actors, their political and religious networks and ties, financing and other sources, this work now also investigates their activities and impact within the political arena. It unpacks the violent discourses and attitudes towards politicians and citizens from particular social groups – Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI), foreign descent, often also women, etc. - and, amongst others, all policies targeting more equality across social groups. This work also demonstrates how anti-gender actors take possession of traditional progressive hubs within the political arena, such as parliamentary (gender) equality committees. This pushes the traditional velvet triangle actors into a formerly unknown position. Indeed, while (gender) equality and antidiscrimination matters are not necessarily prominent on the political agenda, the debates that do take place are highly politicized and polarized. This changes the terms of the debates and arguments, sometimes puts into question the whole definition of underlying knowledge, facts, and research. Additionally, it reshuffles the landscape of who opposes whom and resists what. Ongoing research echoes former work on substantive representation which critically approached the concept of – then mainly – women's needs and interests and the question of how to approach the needs and interests of – then mainly – conservative women. Think of the position respectively on trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) and their alliances with other anti-gender actors.

Next to these studies on the whereabouts in the arena of political participation and representation, another interesting evolution in the research agenda of the last decade is the broader reflection on what representation implies, what is part of it and what that means for its conceptualization. While the representation and participation of social groups initially started from the premise that their representation was necessary and an issue of well defending their interests and needs, the constructivist turn in the representation literature opened a whole new research agenda and understanding of what political representation and participation is about. This constructivist turn, as in so many other fields, put the emphasis

on the fact that needs and interests are not simply given and to be picked up by representatives. Rather, they imply an active intervention on behalf of the representative, the latter constructing what they think are the needs and interests of those they represent. This broadened the research agenda on substantive representation from measuring a list of – mainly second-generation feminist – needs and interests, or issues of legitimisation and accountability, to a broader set of questions on who constitutes whose needs and interests, when, where, how, and why, into which claims on behalf of those to be represented.

Again, there are – at least – two interesting foci in this context: the increased attention to the non-verbal acting and body of representatives, as well as the exploration of Pitkin's symbolic dimension of the concept of representation. Recent work on political representation increasingly focuses on it as a performance, in which not only the content of the actual activity of representing is examined, but also the way in which politicians use non-verbal communication, facial expressions, gestures, body language, their 'characteristics' or 'identity' to make their representative claim. This performance can be meant to legitimize a claim, often to speak and act on behalf of a group, but it can also serve the purpose of a multi-layered reading of a claim, such as when adding irony to the claim made, thereby attributing a different meaning to it. This approach also puts the emphasis on the affective and emotional aspects of representation, that people do not only have to be included but also need to feel it. While not yet producing a lot of research, this line of thought starts to investigate and point at the gendered, racialized, sexualized and other dimensions of such performative aspects of political representation and use of the body, for those representing and those being represented, and the distortive effects this may have on, amongst others, an equal representation and participation of social groups. Tapping into this work, although different, is the recent interest in rethinking of what representation, a representative process, and representatives would look like from a more inclusive – and/or democratic – point of view. Like research on the political arena mentioned above, this work also provides for cues of how to make the latter more inclusive when it comes to participation and representation. But contrary to the work on parliamentary settings, it is more theoretical in focus.

The latter also goes for the other more recent focus of research in this context: the exploration of the symbolic dimension of representation. For long ignored and frowned upon, symbolic representation is the last dimension of political representation theoretically and empirically explored. This work partly unpacks derivative effects of descriptive representation and participation of social groups at the symbolic level, such as political role models – or not – for social groups. It also explores how gender, race, and other social markers are employed as symbols to represent a constituency, group, people or nation, and in what way these and other symbols gender or racialize political representation and participation. The research explores the effects thereof on the legitimacy, inclusion and exclusion of particular social groups, and claims regarding (their) needs and interests, as well as the codification and normalization of forms of domination and power hierarchies in politics and society at large. With its focus on the importance of symbols and how they set the scene for descriptive and substantive representation, this work, too, contributes cues for how to make the arena of political representation and participation more inclusive – and democratic.

It is obvious that this overview does not do justice to the songs diversity and gender studies scholars have been singing over the last couple of years, but it is impossible to sketch the details of how this research has developed in a couple of pages. Nonetheless, this richness reflects both the intellectual growing of the field but also some of the serious challenges we face when it comes to the fair – adequate – political representation and participation of all. Put differently, how the overrepresentation of a small minority is a problem for (the legitimacy of) matters of representation and participation, and democracy at large. Therefore, future research agendas might also want to consider – amongst others – the following perspectives.

Much of these evolutions of the last years brought along an increased attention to the working of power and power dynamics, but there is more to explore in the relation between representation and power beyond the mainstream understandings of power in politics. We need to get beyond guides of good practices for inclusive parties and parliaments, and to unpack the theoretically relevant underlying issues for a fully inclusive democratic representative and participative process. There is a need to better understand and conceptualize along which dimensions and lines power works in processes of representation and participation, and in the (re)production of inequality. It would be useful if that work also embraces the performative character of political representation and the body of political representatives, how particular cues of power are mobilized and used, and how they constitute a power dynamic and power relations that hamper a full political representation and participation of some social groups.

This being said, it is time to rethink our language describing – and our thinking underlying – the representation and participation of all. There is an imminent need to get beyond the categories of gender, let alone women or sex, or of a range of social markers and groups, even if approached in an in intersectional way. The challenge consists yet in adopting a fully intersectional approach without falling into the trap of the liberal claim of covering everybody through an abstract and void universal language of the citizen or people. This reflection should also put more emphasis on the growing range of people excluded from any representation and participation, and oftentimes any form of support or care.

Important in relation to the latter is the fact that it is mostly excluded or marginalized people and their eventual allies who raise issues such problems. As evident as this seems, this can be considered problematic. Indeed, 'why do I have to tell you that you exclude/dominate me as it is you who are the problem'. This issue deserves more profound reflection. We should address why it is seen as the responsibility of disadvantaged or excluded people to raise demands for inclusion and equality. And we should reflect on what to do about it, on how we could change systems and processes of political representation and participation to overcome that issue.

The last three decades have witnessed a rich broadening of our understanding of political representation and participation, but representative democracy is losing ground, being attacked by many actors with profoundly anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, and anti-inclusive aims and attitudes. It would be relevant to consider what that means for our reflections on the yet still exclusive character of (liberal) representative democracy and attempts to make it more inclusive. The question we should address is to what extent these attacks on democracy are inherent to our entire conceptualization of (liberal) representative democracy rather than wondering what to do about it. Do we need to think of innovative systems and procedures of participation and representation, even alternatives for participation and representation? More profoundly, and finally, we still start from basic assumptions we should tackle more in depth. Indeed, we may focus on representative democracy, how it works and how to improve it. However, it is an understatement that real decision-making power to a large extent resides elsewhere in the economy, financial sector and high tech, and that these sectors are also largely exclusive – though not necessarily excluding and marginalizing the same social groups as in the political arena. We should rethink to what extent and how representation and participation are meaningful and can work under such conditions. An interesting question would thus be how to look at problems of marginalization and exclusion in representative democracy from that point of view.

In sum, research on the participation and representation of 'all' is a good indicator for the state of democracy and politics at large. It sounds like there still is a lot of work ahead of us.

References

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